YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

YSU Veterans Project

Vietnam Experience

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RICHARD ELLASHEK

Interviewed

by

David Costello

on

October 31, 1974

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INTERVIEWEE: RICHARD ELLASHEK JR.

INTERVIEWER: David Costello

SUBJECT: Service, Combat Experiences, Troop Morale, My Lai, Amnesty

DATE: October 31, 1974

C: This is an interview with Richard Ellashek for the Youngstown State University Oral History Veterans Project, by David Costello. We're doing the interview at 449 Crandall Avenue, Youngstown, Ohio, at approximately 3:15 p.m. on October 31, 1974.

Good afternoon, Rich. I'd like to start off by asking you a few questions about your background, your family, school, and what you're doing presently.

E: I've lived in Youngstown all of my life. I have two brothers, and one sister, all younger; I'm the oldest in the family. I attended Sheridan Elementary School, Princeton Junior High School, and graduated from South High in 1965. I've had various jobs. I was last employed by Welfare Finance Corporation in Struthers, Ohio. I worked there for two years and I was just recently laid off. I'm now still attending Youngstown University and I expect to have a job the first of the year.

C: Are you married?

E: No, I'm single.

C: Fine. Now I'd like to look to your initial entry into the service. Which service branch were you in?

E: I was in the Army.

C: Why did you go into the Army?

E: Well, I was drafted.

C: I see. When were you drafted?

E: I was drafted March 26, 1968. I had my preliminary physical on January 9, and approximately two months later I was inducted into the service.

C: Where did you go to basic training?

E: My basic training was in Fort Knox, Kentucky.

C: How did you feel about the Army at that point?

E: It was a new experience. It was something I guess you get used to after a while. Just basic training now we are talking about.

C: What happened after basic training?

E: After basic training, I was transferred to Fort Polk, Louisiana, for infantry training. You could call it advanced infantry training. It was very rough and if you go to Fort Polk, you usually know where you're going afterwards.

C: Yes, I was at Fort Polk, too.

E: Were you?

C: Yes. And then what was your MOS [Military Occupational Specialty]?

E: My MOS was 11 B 10, which is light weapons, infantryman.

C: Do you think that your training at Fort Polk prepared for what you were going to do in Vietnam?

E: Basically, I think training at Fort Knox and Fort Polk, as far as my MOS is concerned, was to train you to react to certain situations. Before you were put in those situations, it was hard to tell how you were going to react. But it was just a process of you reacting to a certain situation which they knew about. As far as reacting to those situations, it was completely different. You have to go through it to understand. Basically, what they trained you, you could think about it, and I think the main thing they taught was to have a certain reaction to the situation you were in, in other words, a really fast reaction, especially in a combat situation.

C: When you got to Fort Polk then, you expected to go to Vietnam, is that right?

E: When I got to Fort Polk it was almost inevitable, but the thing is, a lot of people said, "You might go to Germany." They were sending complete companies to Germany, but in the back of your mind you knew they needed infantrymen in Vietnam and you knew where you were going. Actually, you didn't know where you were going in Vietnam, but you knew you were going to Vietnam.

C: Then when you finally did get your order for Vietnam, what was your initial reaction?

E: I was very upset. It's kind of hard to describe in words, but a feeling of going over there . . . especially hearing different stories from returning GI's. It was kind of a bad feeling and you had to realize that you might not make it back. There was a lot of indecision--feelings--that I'm sure a lot of people had. A lot of people who were with me had second thoughts about going, but you get orders.

C: You didn't try to get out of it, did you?

E: No. I just took it for what it was. I knew they said I had to go, so I had to go.

C: How did your family and friends react to your orders for Vietnam?

E: I really think they took it well. It was kind of . . . especially when I found out I was going. I called home and explained the situation--I talked to my father because he could tell my mother which was better than me telling her. You really feel bad. I would say you even feel like crying, you know. It was really a bad feeling.

C: I see. Rich, I'd like now to talk about your Vietnam exprience. First, let's talk about your arrival. What happened when you first arrived? What was your first impression of the place?

E: I think we should start from when I arrived at Oakland. The night before we arrived at Oakland, they had big barracks. They put everybody that was supposedly leaving that day, in those barracks. Then they transfer you to, actually it's a loading point, where they load you on buses. Basically, they give you all your equipment. I think they called it building 390, or something like that. What they do is issue you all your clothing, everything you

need, which was all green, every bit of it. You get on a bus and you go to the airport and it's really a bad situation in that building 390 before you leave because they have a whole row of phones, and everybody is calling home, and you really see some sad situations. You know, guys know they're going. There must have been at least five hundred GI's in there, in that place where we left from, in that building. Then when you get on the plane, it's kind of . . . it's really, really tough. I know guys that really had second thoughts about going then. We went through Alaska and flew approximately fourteen to fifteen hours.

We landed in Tokyo, Yakoda Air Force Base, Japan, and from there we went to Vietnam. I'm sure everybody was looking out the plane window to see what they could see, which was absolutely nothing except a few lights. When we landed, we were put on buses with screens on them and bus drivers have their weapons about them and it's really a scary situation. You have jeeps leading the buses with machine guns on them and you finally realize you are in Vietnam. We went to Long Bien for our disbursement point; you either go there or to Cam Rahn Bay, and we went to Long Bien. We were there approximately two days. During that two days, they had you busy all of the time. As a matter of fact, I worked on a swimming pool which they were building. It was about three-quarters complete. I never got to use it, but we were pouring cement, digging out the various things, filling sand bags, burning human waste, anything they could have us do, sweeping sidewalks, anything to keep us busy. Every day they would have at least two formations where you would . . . everybody at the base who wasn't assigned to a unit yet would congregate and they would have orders passed out on you and they would announce your name and where you were going and what checkpoint to go to. They had like--actually they looked like bus stops, and you went and got your gear and everything and you reported to that. They had different signs. Well, I was assigned to the Americal Division. We heard a lot of rumors about it, as far as what it was supposed to be like. There were people telling us that it was to guard the Air Force base there and that's all you did was guard the Air Force base. Well, I never heard of the Americal Division and I don't think too many other guys who I was with did either, and we were at Long Bien for, as I said, approximately three days, two or three days anyway.

Then we went to Thu Lai, and we landed in the middle of the night and it was completely dark and all we saw were jet engines--the exhaust from jet engines--taking off. It was quite a flight; you couldn't hear yourself think. It was one of those, I guess you'd call it C-130's, and it's always a transport plane, but everybody that went with me went to the combat center for the Americal Division. What they do is give you an indoctrination period of five to seven days, depending on how badly they need your unit. Then you're assigned to certain units; I think the Americal had the 11th Brigade and the 196th and the 198th. There were three different brigades. We were actually just shown what goes on; we had booby trap training, how to dig up mines. Then they had work details to fill sand bags, put up tents, and it's really amazing because when I visited that place six months later, they didn't have half the guys there then that they did when I was there. They had to put up extra tents and everything because they had so many guys processing in. I think it was between the end of 1968 and the beginning of 1969 they really had a lot of troops coming in from the Americal Division. About five to seven days later we went to a place called LZ Gator, which is about five miles south of Thu Lai, and we were brought to our company. Actually I was part of 198 Infantry Brigade, 5th Battalion, 46th Infantry and I was in Company D. It was an infantry outfit and we weren't guarding any airport; we were actually going in to combat.

At the time I arrived, our particular company was out on maneuver and they had quite a battle on their hands and I feel quite lucky to not have gone out that day. They were planning on sending us, then as we were going up to the helicopter pad, they got information that our company was being hit and had many wounded. I know for a fact they had one killed, a GI had arrived one day before I did was a fatality.

C: When was it that you arrived in Vietnam, around when?

E: I left the United States September 2, 1968, and I arrived approximately September 3rd or 4th.

C: How long were you going to be in Vietnam?

E: I had a twelve month tour of duty.

C: Now you said they kept you real busy. Did you have any time to think in that first week at all? If you did, what did you think about? What went through your mind? Were you frightened? Were you thinking about death?

Do you recall what went through your mind?

E: I think everybody had thoughts of what it was going to be like. I don't think everybody, including myself, realized exactly what was going to happen. It was really what you had been going through for the last six months anyway. The training that you went through, it was just like when you got there, it was a repeat of it. I don't think we realized it until we arrived at our company and then we were transported to where our company was.

The first day--I arrived on what was called LZ Buff at that time--we received sniper fire. It was the first time I had ever been on a helicopter and I think the pilots knew that I was new and I was holding on for dear life. All the other guys in the helicopter had been on them before and they were laughing and they thought it was really funny because I was holding on for dear life. They went at treetop level to cut down their changes of being fired on because they would pass the sniper so quick. I'd say I really didn't realize it until we came under fire the first time and then I really realized those people were shooting at me.

C: I'd like to get to that in a moment. First, I'd like to ask you what exactly your job was in this unit. It seems like a crazy question.

E: I was an infantryman. Infantry is what they call ground pounder. You are there to go on foot to protect outlying areas. I think the thing that people don't realize is in World War II there was a line of defense, whereas in Vietnam there was no line at all. Wherever you were is where they were, the enemy, if you call the enemy the North Vietnamese, the Vietcong, whatever. But you weren't safe anywhere. Wherever you were, they were. You could be anyplace and get shot at. It wasn't like if you were in back of the lines you were safe because your fellow GI's were protecting on the front lines. There were no front lines in Vietnam.

C: What was your rank when you arrived?

E: When I arrived, I was a Private E2. I made PFC out of AIT. There weren't too many that were, but when you got to Vietnam you were automatically PFC. As long as you were Private E2 when you went over, then you were automatically PFC. They gave you one grade

in other words.

C: How were your duty hours? Were they long? What was an average duty or duty week?

E: Depending on where you were, if you were in the LZ, usually they had two companies in, two companies out. In other words, two companies were guarding the LZ and the other two companies were on maneuvers.

C: What was the LZ exactly?

E: It's called the Landing Zone. All it was, there were various hills in the different divisions, like the Americal Division 101 Airborne; they all have LZs. They are just hills in various locations picked to protect that area or that outlying town or whatever was there, from the Vietcong. Actually that's where you stay when you come in from maneuvers to get reclothed and take a shower, and if you're lucky to relax a little bit. They had wooden barracks made out of plywood with screen on them and they had tin roofs. The entire building was protected by bunkers. I think on LZ Gator there were approximately 25 bunkers. There was an artillery unit on our hill. We were actually there to protect them and there was at least one company in all the time, plus they had headquarters company, which also pulled guard. But when you were in from the field, you pulled guard. You were assigned a bunker. Actually, they had a skeleton crew on during the day and everybody else was working, laying barbed wire, filling sand bags, repairing things. Actually, they never gave you a relaxing moment until evening when it got dark.

If you were on the bunker line, you couldn't relax anyway because you had to stay there all night. You took turns; you might be on, depending on how you wanted to work it out with the other GI's in your bunker. There were usually three; you worked two-hour shifts. Then you slept for four and got up or you could pull your whole four hours. It usually took twelve hours. You usually went like at nine at night and you came back to your hootch at twelve. Well, actually nine in the morning, so you actually worked twelve hours. Or you could go down earlier depending on when your relief came or when they called you down; but as soon as you got back, you ate breakfast and you went and filled sandbags, and laid wire or whatever.

C: How long did you stay out on the Landing Zone when you'd go out, a day or week?

E: The Landing Zone is where you stayed all the time. If you went out in the field, you could stay out . . . The longest we were out was sixty days.

C: Sixty days?

E: Right. Now we were out without coming back to any Landing Zone. As a matter of fact, it was a big operation. In January of 1969, it was called the Bataan Penisula and there were at least four thousand GI's--United States--and one thousand Arvins who cordoned off the Bataan Penisula to--it was a search and destroy mission--get rid of the Vietcong in that area. We moved maybe a hundred yards a day and in a line so that all five thousand GI's moved at the same time. It was coordinated by helicopters above to make sure the line was in line, and as you went you have engineers with you to destroy all bunkers, all underground tunnels, anyone you could find and capture, anybody that was there. We did that for approzimately thirty days and after that we built a bunker. But we were there for sixty days, definitely out in the field with no coming back to our regular Landing Zone. We were out in that field for sixty days and everything that we were supplied with was supplied by helicopter.

C: Where did you sleep when you were out in the field?

E: Oh, you sleep on the ground. You usually had an air mattress that you carried with you, but the problem with that is it usually had holes in it from being on the ground. And you had a poncho liner. The weather over there wasn't bad; you got wet quite a bit. You were taught in basic training and AIT how to build shelters with your poncho or whatever, but actually there wasn't that much protection. I'd say about 75 percent of the time you were out in the field, at least your feet were wet or something else because you were walking through rice paddies if you weren't being rained on, so you were wet.

C: It must have been pretty rough. I'd like to get back to that in a minute when we talk about the combat aspect. Let me ask you, when you cam in from maneuvers, was there any time where you were under what we might say normal living conditions? Were you under a roof and you were eating food in a cafeteria or anything like that, more or less like the people had it in Saigon, or in more, you might say, protected areas?

E: No, like I said, the only living quarters we had when we

came in was the bunker or you had the hootches which were built by your fellow soldiers who were there before you. They were just plywood halfway up and screens the other half and they were built on stilts off the ground so no reptiles could get in, snakes and so on. They had stairs up to them and tin roofs. It wasn't much protection, but that's where we stayed. They had cots for you, which was better than sleeping on the ground. The cafeteria was made of the same things. There was no hootch that was made of cement block or anything like that. It was all, everyone of them on the hill was that or a bunker. You spent your nights in a bunker and your days, if you were lucky, in a hootch, but as far as living quarters like in the city like in Saigon or Long Bien or anyplace like that, there were no living conditions like that.

C: Now how about the time off, what did you do?

E: To begin with, we didn't get much time off. I never made it back to Thieu Lai, which was only five miles away from our Landing Zone, for six months. That's how busy they kept us, going on maneuvers and staying on the bunker line and so forth, so I never got to the PX for six months. Now at various times, they would allow at least two or three GI's, if they had to go in to a doctor or a dentist or something like that, they would let them go in. And if youwwanted something, they would take your order. The did issue cigarettes at times; usually you had to buy cartons in Thieu Lai and the only time you got those was when somebody went in. They did issue cigarettes at times, candy packs, actually they're C Ration packs. But now your C Rations are the food you ate out on the, I guess you call it boonies, and the C Rations were of various--they had chicken, we called it shrapnel, and potatoes. Shrapnel was called potatoes and it was beef and shrapnel, we called it. But when that's the only thing you had to eat, you ate it.

When I first got over there, I didn't like ham and eggs in the C Ration cans. After awhile, I got used to it. They had little cans of cheese and you used to mix it with the cheese and eat it; it tasted a little better. There were various things that were better than others; you used to trade for peaches and pound cake or pecan roll that came in the can. In each can they gave you a little pack of cigarettes. I think they had four in each pack, so the guys that didn't smoke, you usually got theirs. They gave you a roll of toliet paper, matches, two packs of Chiclets, or one pack; it was just

gum for after. They used to keep that for after.

C: I bet your package from home was well awaited.

E: Well, the thing is, the packages from home you usually didn't get to enjoy, because you weren't there that long. Usually when you got packages from home it was nice though. I can remember when it was my birthday and I was 21 years old and I was in a bunker with this GI from Marietta, Ohio and his birthday was the same day. I had at least ten packages, but we had just come in from maneuvers and we were out for at least fifteen days. I had all those packages waiting for me, but we got orders to go the next day. And all those cookies, candy, and stuff I couldn't take with me so we just spread them all over the LZ and gave them to everybody. If you had time to enjoy them, it would have been nice. There were times we did, but that certain time we didn't, and that's why I got all the packages.

C: In your whole year then, did you have a chance at all toward the end to get into any of the villages and towns to see things, to kind of be a tourist? Or was all your time spent doing basically military things the whole year?

E: Well, almost all of it was military. When I got there, GI's had permission to go to the village to get their laundry done and so forth and so on, but after I was there about three or four months, they put all the villages off limit. In other words, if a GI was caught in a village or even going through the village without a pass, the MP's could pick him up, and they did patrol. We had MP's on our Landing Zone just for that reason. As a matter of fact, I met a MP from Youngstown who tried to catch me in the field and I had known him before I left and it just so happened that he was coming through the village one day and I was stopped in a jeep. He wanted to take us in and give us a citation. They called them DR's, direct reprimands, and we would get in trouble, but I knew him and I hadn't seen him. You know, I didn't even know he was there, so it was quite a coincidence.

C: Speaking of seeing people there and making friends while you were in Vietnam, did you make any friends there that you retained, any friendships that you've retained since you've been out of the service?

E: Definitely. There are a number of guys I was over there with and I still keep in contact with. There's

one especially, who was my commanding officer for the first six months I was there. As a matter of fact, the last month he was our commanding officer, I was made radio telephone operator. In other words, I was his radio telephone operator and there were three of us. I was actually replaced. I was just like in training, you know, to get to know certain operations. He had three RTO's but it just so happens that one of the main RTO's who had maybe three months left in the country was wounded. He was shot three times at the same time and they had to dust him off. They sent him home so I took his place. All I was doing was training to replace him when he left, but after, I took over quicker than I was supposed to. But I had been a RTO as a squad member and then I went to platoon level RTO through Lieutenant, and I made the company commander's RTO. He was from Ohio, so I was best man at his wedding. There were various other guys, some from New York and there are a few, one in California that I still keep in contact with at Christmas.

C: Rich, since you were in a combat unit, I assumed that you did see some action. What was your, let's say, most impressionable experience in combat? Is there anything that you remember more than any other experience when you were in action?

E: I would say there was one. I previously stated about the Bataan Peninsula operation. The operation started in early January. It involved, as I said, many GI's, approximately four thousand. The Marines and the Navy were in the South China Sea protecting us from the water and then we pushed inland and it started; we were in the middle; our Company C was on the right flank and Company A and B were on our left. Everybody moved at the same time. We started from a place called . . . anyway, it was a place that was down the road from ours. We started inland to get to the Bataan Peninsula four days before the mission was to start, and we were setting up. Actually, it was a headquarters for the whole division on a hill and it was a huge hill. Our company was the one that was supposedly supposed to secure this area, and we left our second platoon on the hill to secure it for the whole division. We went down; we had a rice paddy to cross, so as is regularly done we set up security behind us. There were a few villages at the bottom of the hill and usually you can tell when they're upset or whatever you want to call it. As a matter of fact, one lady was laughing at us and nobody knew what for. Of course, I think a lot of GI's probably thought about it--what she was laughing at. But anyway,

we did set up security before we crossed the rice paddy. We had the weapons platoon. We had the first and third platoons and we left the second on top of the hill so they weren't involved in this. But we started out across and we had two columns. Now in various places this rice paddy was actually flooded and there were points where you couldn't even stand up in the water, that's how deep it was. When everybody, except for the machine guns on the back, was in the water, it must have been a platoon or a company of Vietcong or NVA [North Vietnamese Army] that opened up on us and the first shot killed a GI. He was in the first platoon in the other column. I was in the left column; he was in the right column and the first shot hit him right in the head. The medics tried to get to him. The firing was so intense it was unbelievable. The bad thing was, usually when you're on land, you can't see the bullets hit. When you're in water, you can see the bullets hit everyplace and there were guys all around me getting hit. There were guys getting creased in the neck, and as I said, this is when the RTO who I replaced, he got shot in the shoulder, the ankle, and the buttocks; they just split wide open with one shot. There were guys hit in the stomach. They dusted off, I'd say, at least seven or eight, three or four in serious condition. There were GI's dropping their rifles, dropping their packs; they just panicked. One tried to grab on to one of the GI's who was already on the dustoff. The captain who was next to me pulled his .45 and told the man to drop or he would shoot him. The thing is, which amazed me, usually they'll fire on dustoffs. In other words, all helicopters marked with crosses are, under the Geneva Convention, to be able to pick the wounded and then the fire fighting is supposed to resume. But I've seen instances where they did fire on a dustoff when he was coming in, and there were a lot of them shot down. This instance they did not fire on the helicopter that time. The problem we had was nobody could fire back because all their weapons were wet; we were all underwater. As a matter of fact, I was just floating in the water, trying to just keep my head above. There wasn't too much else I wanted to get above the water because it definitely would have been shot. It was really, really a bad experience. We finally decided to retreat; it wasn't actually a retreat, we just moved to the side. We don't like to say retreat. But we moved to the side to this village which was secured by the people we left behind to cover our backs. We were being fired at from the back and the front. We moved to the side. I was helping the captain carry a radio of the man who was dusted off. At that time, I was trying to crouch behind the dike so I would not be shot, and it was just bullets flying all over and it wasn't us that

was shooting, it was them. I felt a thump in my back and it pushed me forward. I didn't realize what had happened. When you're in that situation you don't think, about all you are trying to do is avoid being shot. You don't really think about it; you aren't nervous or shaky or anything. You're just worried about getting out of there.

When we got to the village, I was trying to get my radio to work. They had built a little fire to dry out the radios and the weapons. I was drying out my radio and I pulled it out of my pack and I looked at my C Rations. I had them in a sock just hung from my ruksack, because that's the way we usually did it. It was easier to pack them. You had other things. I had my radio in my pack; it was awful heavy and I pulled my radio and I was trying to dry it off and another guy at my side was looking at the radio and here there was a bullet in it. And my best C Rations, my chicken C Rations, which was the best going, had a hole right through it and it went right through my radio. Now if I hadn't had that radio on my back, I probably would have been dead because it was right in the place where it would have gone right through my chest, heart, or whatever. After that, everybody was shook up. We were just trying to maneuver to a place to set up for that night because we knew we couldn't reach the rest of our troops which were supposed to join the cordon. We just stayed that night and everybody was soaked and wet. I know I lost a whole carton of cigarettes which were awfully precious. They just went floating down the rice paddy and there was no way I was going to go get them. Nobody had any dry cigarettes. Usually you put them in plastic so they don't get wet, but nobody had any. Everybody else's were wet and the captain had a whole carton wrapped up in his ruksack and I swear the three of us, giving away a few packs, the three of us finished at least five packs that night. They give you little pads, you light them and they heat your food. We used every one that we had just to keep warm. We tried to build some shelter. It was really quite chilly that night and everybody was cold; it was dark and was really an experience. That was one of the worst experiences.

C: Were you in any other fire fights in the rest of your time?

E: Yes, quite a few. They were too numerous. Usually they were just snipers. After being there six months, I know we lost at least . . . three killed and fourteen wounded with one mine. It was a German Sheperd tracker dog who stepped on the mine and he was killed; his handler got both his legs blown off.

I know one GI who lost both his legs and his testicles and he died on the way to the hospital ships. They had hospital ships. The Marines came and helped us out, but this happened in the same operations exactly two days after the situation I just described in the rice paddy. This whole operation was just mines and booby traps. They called one particular type a bouncing buddy You stepped on it and it would bounce up to your chest level or higher and just blow. At that time, they were timed devices. Most of these were all the mine fields that weren't plotted because the French had left them there or the Koreans who had been there previously, and nobody knew exactly where they were. Where you walked, you had to watch; there were various places that you didn't even know they were there.

After we cleared the area we built what we called a LZ minuteman after our helicopter company, who transported us everyplace; it took us a month to build that and we built all the bunkers. They flew everything out to us as far as wood was concerned to build the frames, and we filled every sandbag on that place. We had at least fifteen bunkers. We even had the place wired and everything. Even the little kids who were still in the villages,were trying to build villages to reestablish that area for villagers. They built them tin shacks and things and built them just for those people, and those kids were stepping on those mines, at least one a day.

C: Now, Rich, continuing with the combat experiences you've had, a lot of literature and debate centered around the bombing runs, especially in the latter stages. But at the time you were there, did the bombing, our bombing, give you some sense of security, knowing our planes were there to help you from the air? Did that help at all? If there wouldn't have been any Air Force support, would it have made a difference?

E: I think it would have made a difference; as a matter of fact, it did. But let me first say, I think the problem over there is when you were in contact, you were so close to the enemy, you would receive shrapnel from a bomb's drop off jets. You have to be awfully careful to mark your position for helicopter gun ships so you would not be fired upon. As I said, I gave one instance in the rice paddy, where we were under fire. The front man, the point man, was so close to the Vietcong that he could see them. They were right behind a little hill or a little mound and he was trying to stay down and he couldn't even get up to fire because they were so close.

We had mine sweepers in front of us; in other words, they carried the mines, but there was so much shrapnel that he couldn't even, he detected something every five feet, which makes it awfully rough. We felt the effects; I was there for two months.

In November of 1968, President Johnson stopped the bombing of North Vietnam and cut down the bombing of South Vietnam and I would say that we really felt the effects because we were getting into much more contact. They were infiltrating men and equipment much more often than they did before. I think the people of the divisions that were up north felt it much more than we did, but as I said, we did feel it.

I think the gunships, if you would see one in action, they really do a job. I think it was quite effective as far as stopping the snipers or whatever you contact. If we got into a fire fight you would have to give them the exact position, and usually the Vietcong if they sniped on you, they were in a hole the next minute so you didn't have much of a chance to get them. They would get up and fire a few shots. Usually you never even saw them, you just knew you were being fired upon, and you just fired where you thought it was coming from.

As far as regular fire fights, they used napalm which was white phosphorus which was really, really nasty stuff. I've seen people who have been burned with white phosphorus and it's really an ugly mess. People have no medical attention; actually, they were innocent people. The thing about it is, if you're fired upon, anything that moves is going to get shot at, somebody is going to shoot at it. And usually it's innocent people that are moving trying to get out of the way. I know you see something move. I know for a fact that one of my best friends, who was a black guy from New York . . . he took care of me while I was over there, as far as teaching me the ropes because he was over there six months before me. We were getting fired upon; we were in a helicopter landing and they started firing at us. We were jumping out of the helicopter at ten feet and we were getting sniped at and he saw something moving and he shot it and an hour later, after the firing had stopped, we went and checked it out and here was a six or seven or eight year old boy. He really felt bad. As I said at the beginning, he was taught to react and he was reacting to that situation. When it's just pounded into you to react to that situation, you just jump, you react, you fire.

You fire anything that moves. I think it's all involved in the training. Maybe a lot of guys weren't like that, but I know for a fact I was and he was. I think they just trained you to do that.

C: How do you think that our men felt? As draftees a lot of guys didn't want to go to the war and a lot of guys thought it was wrong. How did the guys that you associated with think?

E: I think that it was the fact that you were just trying to protect yourself, trying to get back and the only way you could do that was to fire at them before they fired at you. The only thing you could do is try and save yourself. You had to think of the guy next to you. You had to watch what you were doing. I think when everybody was under fire for the first time, they realized what was going on. They were getting shot at by real bullets and there was no playing around. Once you were there, you knew it was too late to come back or you would get court-martialed and they would send you to jail or something. I think everybody was just trying to get back and protect themselves, and if they had to, protect the guy that was next to them, but it was really a bad situation. There were a lot of things going on that were kind of shaky.

C: In what respect was it, what do you mean by that?

E: Like guys not coordinating things right. I know we were ambushed by our own second platoon one time because there was a lack of communication between our lieutenants. I knew one lieutenant, for a fact, gave the wrong coordinates and they were attacked at night. They were out on patrol, ambush patrol, and he gave the wrong coordinates because they didn't want to move any further than they were. In other words, they didn't want to go any further than they had to so they just stopped at one point and the coordinates he gave was where he was supposed to be, but where he wasn't. And when they were attacked there were guys who were really messed up, shot and stuff and they needed attention and they had to be dusted off. He couldn't give the right coordinates and when they called for artillery, the artillery was already laid in there and if he would have called and told them to fire, it might have hit him. He wasn't in the right place. In other words, there was a lot of . . . guys didn't want to go as far as they were supposed to. At the end I think there were problems. When I was leaving, I know that guys were getting into

real problems of whether they should go where this lieutenant told them to go or what because I think the dissention, the GI's were really getting fed up with what they were having to do and where they were sending them. The odds, I really feel the odds were against them.

C: Did you know of any cases at this time of fragging, in other words, where men were trying to waste their own officers?

E: No. I know of a lot of guys who talked about it, but I never witnessed one who did. We never lost a lieutenant; there were instances where we had a captain and followed the one I was RTO for. I was RTO for the new one but he was, I guess what you would call, a lifer. He was a West Point graduate, who thought he knew it all. Actually, I know for a fact since I was his RTO that he didn't, and he really treated the guys bad compared to the first CO we had who was really good. He [old commander] was I guess what you would call--he graduated from Oklahoma State University and was in the ROTC program. He realized what the guys were going through and he tried treating them the best way possible under the situation. He had to ask them to do things but he explained the situation to them and it was a lot more warmer atmosphere. Then when the new one came he wanted everything spit and polished. You had to have your boots polished and everything and you're in a combat zone, you know. There were times when I know guys were talking about it, but nobody ever did anything.

C: How was your leadership overall, your officer leadership, your NCO [Noncommissioned officer] leadership?

E: I would say that it was about 50-50. There were some lieutenants who didn't know what they were doing. There were some CO's who didn't know what they were doing.

When I first got over there, the leadership was really good. All the lieutenants that I was associated with in my company and all the, like the commanding officer of the 5th Battalion, 46th Infantry, were excellent. For instance, if they couldn't get a dustoff, then he would come down and pick him up. In other words, that saved a lot of guys lives. I know for a fact that he came under fire many times to come down and pick up GI's, and he was just that kind of guy and you really respected him for doing that. He didn't have to. Most of the colonels over there probably flew far enough up in the air where they wouldn't even get shot at, whereas he walks right into the thick of the battle. I know both he and my commanding officer wanted to stay, but they wouldn't let him. If they would have stayed, I think it

would have been a lot easier. There was also the fact that I think they really cared, I really do. You didn't find that very often over there.

C: Now we just talked about your combat experience. While you were in combat and on maneuvers, did you operate at all with the Arvan or the South Vietnamese Army in these maneuvers?

E: We did, yes. The Arvans, as far as I'm concerned, were not worth anything. If they would have kept them out, it would have been a lot better. They, this might sound upsetting to a lot of people, didn't really care. They didn't want any part of fighting. When they were supposed to be protecting us or protecting our flanks, they were running. I know for a fact that the first operation I went on, they ran. And I know guys, GI's, who were supposedly firing at them, for running. You have to wonder how those people felt about the war. It was really--it gave us a lot of--what were we doing over there if they didn't care. Even though they had to be in the Army, I know they were drafted. There were operations that we went on to find the young people near our area of operations; we went at say four o'clock in the morning, we would go and sneak up on a village; we would surround it and we would have Vietnamese police with us and we would sneak up and cordon the village so nobody could get out. They would go into each hootch or whatever and find the draft evaders and they would induct them into the Army, unless there was some physical reason that they couldn't. But the thing is, they were doing the same thing the people in the United States were doing, evading the draft. It's their war and they're the ones that should be concerned about it, but they didn't want to go either. I know the Arvans, for a fact, were really bad. I don't know whether other GI's would agree with me or not, but from what I saw, they were.

Now we did work with one group who we called the CIDG's; they were called the Civil Irregular Defense Group and they were trained in combat situations. I don't know where they got their training, but they were fantastic and they had Green Berets as advisors. And the Green Berets handled, they knew the Vietnamese language and so forth and so on. They usually had a sergeant and a captain with them who operated the radios and so forth, but these guys, they were young kids; some of them were only thirteen year old kids and they took no baloney from anybody. They really did a job. They were the best I saw over there. There was no other Vietnamese group--I know the Koreans were really good too, but you

had to depend on those people. You couldn't depend on the Arvans and especially when we worked with them, we were always watching them, you know, what they did, and you couldn't trust them as far as you could throw them.

C: Now the South Vietnamese, they didn't make good soldiers or you possibly couldn't trust them as soldiers? How did you feel about the people themselves, the people who weren't in the army, the regular persons?

E: All right, a lot of people were just innocent bystanders. In other words, they didn't want to have anything to do with the war at all, especially the people way out in the sticks that had no contact with the city but maybe once a month that they might come in. They grew all their own food and they just wanted to be left alone. It was a situation that you didn't know if they were involved with the Vietcong or they were protecting them; they could have been, we don't know. You had to go by what other people told you, like scouts, [lurks] They sent out patrols of four guys and investigated all this and so-so.

In the villages now, we're talking about a completely different situation where people love the GI's for their money. Now probably that is all they loved them for, I don't know. You had to watch what you were doing and you had to watch where you went, but they did all our laundry, most of it anyway. Down in the village, they would take it down there and have it done. They would sell us Cokes for say fifty cents a piece and it really wasn't good Coke, but it tasted like Coke so everybody drank it. They sold us souvenirs; there were various other things they sold.

A lot of GI's went to the village when I first got there, all the time. But right after I got there, they cut off the villages; it was off limits. I know guys who sneaked out of the wire in the middle of the night to go down there and see some young lady. But you know, you were taking your life in your hands, as far as that's concerned because you never knew what was going on. But the people, I think the people were just--I think we were very unpopular over there because of the way the people were treated, especially out in the boonies.

I know for a fact, that one time we landed in an LZ. It was supposed to be hot so all the helicopters opened up fire, all the helicopters' gunners, and we landed just to protect us from getting out of the helicopters. I know they killed an eleven year old girl right on the spot. It was just a stray bullet;

they probably didn't mean it or didn't see her, but it still was a fact that this little girl was walking down the road and she got shot. So how would her mother and father and sister and brother feel about this? It's really a bad situation because those people are innocent bystanders; whether they were involved or not, who's to say. I can't say whether they were involved or not. There were a lot of innocent people. Really, if you think about it, you've got to feel sorry for them.

C: How do you think the average GI felt about the South Vietnamese people?

E: I think it was mixed feelings; it depends on the GI. There were a lot of them that didn't even care. As I said, there were times when we were under fire, you just shot anyplace you saw anything move and innocent people were getting shot and I'm sure those people were . . . but then again you have to look at it, the fact that Vietcong were around that area so those people might have been protecting them. There were various booby traps. You couldn't walk on the rice paddy dikes because they felt that the villagers were planning booby traps on them so you had to walk through the rice paddies. And it was quite hard with the pack and all; it was mud, you were ankle deep in mud, and you know trudging through that stuff five miles or six you're tired. If you stopped for a break or something, you could get sniped on; you didn't know who was doing it. It could have been a lady with a gun, but it was just the fact that I think they should have just cleared those areas out. Of course, you can't take those people out of their homes; I wouldn't want to be taken out of mine, but for their own protection . . . I think most of the people were just innocent bystanders; they didn't want any part of it. That's all there was to it.

C: Did you go on R & R?

E: Yes, I did.

C: Where did you go?

E: I went to Taipei, Formosa.

C: What was R & R like? Was it worthwhile?

E: I didn't go on R & R for about eight months. I was over there for eight months and I hadn't gone yet so when I went, I went with another guy from my outfit and after being out in the field for eight months, I think you deserve a break. It was nice. You're always ready to

go on R & R. You heard a lot of stories. You talked to GI's that had already been there and told you what to do and where to go. All the bars and everything were established in Taipei. You could go various places and visit various things and usually you were fixed up with a young lady who knew where to take you.

The food at the GI club was good; it was cheap and the drinks were cheap. You could buy various things that were really good, like with good craftmanship, like jade. Jade was really cheap there and it was good jade. I bought a jade ring; it was nice. It was just like, you were relaxed but you still have the feeling that you had to go back, but that was five days that you were really going to enjoy yourself, see the sights and so forth.

C: Now four months after that, you got ready to leave Vietnam. Discuss your departure from Vietnam and your landing back in the States, some of the feelings .

E: When I left, there was a problem. I don't know whether many people know about this, but I think this is when they were supposedly shipping more GI's over there than any other time of the war. What they were doing was giving GI's who had already been there like nine months, drops. In other words, they were giving them forty or fifty day drops. They were leaving them go home a month or so earlier. Well, the problem that we ran into was when we got there they had so many GI's going home, supposedly because they were getting drops, especially like the 4th Infantry Division. I know there were a lot of guys there who were getting drops of thirty days.

Well, I was getting, what they told me was a three day drop. In other words, they sent me to Cam Rahn Bay at the end of August and I was supposed to be home by September 1st. What happened was all these GI's who they were giving drops to were going home before I was and I had alreasy spent my twelve months there. So finally what they did, there were so many backed up that they had to clear out dining areas and dining rooms and put beds in there to hold all these GI's. There were guys sleeping in tents, in the sand outside. They had flights going all the time. You just waited for your orders to come down and be called for your flight. It was getting to the point where a lot of GI's were getting mad. I know for a fact that an officer, a Major, went and complained about the situation that he had been there twelve months and these guys were going home before he was and they hadn't spent their whole time. So I think they cancelled all drops

as far as I heard, and we processed out.

I got home on September 2nd. We went through Yakoda Air Force Base, Japan. We went directly then to Fort Lewis, Washington. Now getting a flight out of Fort Lewis, Washington--when we got there, they took you to an out-processing center where you fill out all your papers. They fit you with a brand new uniform for you to go home with. You usually threw away everything you had from Vietnam.

It was really interesting when we left. We got on a plane and the stewardesses--it was really hot and humid that night, about one o'clock in the morning--gave us these cold washcloths to wipe our faces off with and it was really something else, it was really nice. Everybody, I don't think, really felt the full brunt of going home until they were off that ground. And when that plane lifted off, I thought that it was going to fall apart, there was so much clapping and stomping feet and everybody was really happy.

C: Did you get nervous about coming home, anxiety the last couple of months, weeks, and days?

E: Yes. I think you always worry about whether you're going to make it out, especially those last thirty days. I know that a lot of guys, you have to almost expect the guys who have thirty days left, sandbag. You know, they don't want to go out in the field. They want to stay on the LZ where it's halfway safe. Not meaning that that's safe because our LZ was run over a couple of times, so you're actually not that safe. But at least you're safer there than you are out in the field. I know guys that every chance you got, you would got into Chieu Lai to get your paper work done to go home. You really look forward to it, you know, you wait, you have to go home, you have to go home.

So they give you a steak dinner when you land at Fort Lewis, Washington, after they fit you for your uniform and you are waiting for it. They give you the steak dinner, you go take a shower and everything, and your uniform's ready. They have it done almost immediately, which is nice. Then they take you to the airport on the bus. Well the things is, it's hard to get flights out. Most of the guys I know, that I came home with, tried to get standby because you were in uniform. But usually the planes were filled up going out and I know guys that were paying, who were paying full first-class fare to get out of that place.

I know I had to go from Fort Lewis, Washington to Portland, Oregon to catch a flight to Chicago, which tied up some time. I didn't call my parents until I got to Chicago and they were waiting here for me. When I got to Chicago, I really did know I was home.

C: Then what was your next assignment, duty station, after you came home?

E: I was assigned to Fort Hood, Texas.

C: How long were you there?

E: I got an early out for school. I was only there actually about three and a half months. I got an early out, September 13, 1970, to come back to Youngstown State University.

C: So you got out of the service to go back to school?

E: Right.

C: I want to ask some questions basically along the lines of reflection on what we've talked about. I'll try not to repeat anything if I can. I'd like to ask you first, in your experience there, what was possibly the most demoralizing thing that you saw in Vietnam? Was there any one thing?

E: I would say the people, really. The people I saw, not being in Saigon or someplace like that but being out in the field where you could see the people, you really had to feel sorry for the kids. Maybe it's just me, I don't know if any other GI's felt like this or not, but just seeing those kids and how they were going to grow up. You really have to be thankful for all the things that you have in the United States. And I just wish everybody could see how those kids were over there and how they lived and what they went through, and what they're still going through. It's really bad, makes you, makes me feel bad.

C: Now when you look back on the war, the years, ten or so, maybe it wasn't ten, it's debatable, do you think it was worthwhile?

E: It depends on what . . . I don't know. You have to look at a few things. If the United States really wanted to win that war, you could have gone in there and just, I feel, taken over the whole thing. It would have been no problem. I don't know whether it was some kind of game, or not. It wasn't a declared war, it wasn't a popular war. I know my brother went too, and

that was two from one family. I know a lot of people really felt . . . I didn't feel it was worth it. There were a lot of guys, a lot of guys who I was really close to that got killed and there was no sense to them getting killed.

C: Did you disagree then with the government's policy, our policy in Vietnam?

E: If they were there to stop the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese, they could have done it very easily, and as far as I'm concerned, with no problem, if they really wanted to. It could have been over; they didn't have to drag it on as far as they did. If they wanted to do it, they could have done it. I don't agree with the way they did it.

C: Do you think that the war was part and parcel of some of the problems we had in this country in the 1960's? Do you think it was responsible for a lot of the problems?

E: I would say so. Even now, when you mention it now, there's a lot of dissention. The guys that went to Vietnam took it for granted that they were going. Okay, if they got called to go, they'd go. If they didn't, if they were lucky enough to stay in the United States and didn't have to go, like I know these guys I went to high school with went to the service, but they never went to Vietnam. All right, they just took it, "Well, I'm not going to volunteer to go." And you can't blame them, especially with some of duty you had over there; it's really kind of ridiculous. I think that the guys who were in my unit just faced up to the fact that they were there and they were going to make the best of it in order to get back.

C: How do you feel about draft dodgers and amnesty?

E: I, myself, might have had different feelings than other guys. I think it was the way I was brought up. In other words, I was called to go. Those guys, if they want to come back and pay their debt to society or whatever they have to do to come back, that's fine. You know, I wouldn't look down on them.

C: Then you would support some sort of conditional amnesty. In other words, if these guys would be allowed to come back into the States, that they do some sort of domestic duty, like work in a hospital or something . . . conditional amnesty, you would be in favor of that as opposed to unconditional amnesty, where these guys just come back and say, "Well, that was my decision; I made up my own mind," and come back.

E: They would have to make up some kind of . . . It would have to be something they would have to make up. I don't believe, myself, that they could make up anything to replace those guys who are already gone. There's nothing they could do. If that's the situation, actually you have to know the reasons why they did not go. I'm sure that a lot of them had very good reasons for not going. Maybe there's something, you know, we don't know. I can't judge those people without knowing the reasons why they didn't go to the service. I know why I went; I went and it's over. I'll tell you, really, myself, I grew up; I think I really matured when I was in the service. I learned a lot. I learned what life was all about. I appreciate the things I have now. If they want to come back, you know . . .

C: Basically, if they would do some retribution . . .

E: Well, who am I to say? I can't judge somebody else.

C: So, it would be taken on an individual basis, then, you think?

E: As far as I'm concerned?

C: Yes, as far as you're concerned.

E: Right.

C: How did you feel about the protests and demonstrations against the war?

E: I think that when I was in the service I didn't realize exactly what was going on. I'm sure that people had their reasons for protesting. I imagine that everybody has their own bag, as they say; whatever suits them, as long as they don't infringe on me. They weren't bothering me. You know, they have their own opinions. If that's the way they want to voice them, go ahead. I have no bad feelings toward them as far as protesting goes.

C: How about My Lai, do you think that it has been handled correctly by the government or the Army? Do you think that it was inevitable that something like My Lai happened? What is your feeling about My Lai?

E: I'll tell you for a fact right now, My Lai was one out of many situations that happened over there. That wasn't the only one. I don't care what anybody says or how many people will deny the fact. I never saw something like that happen in my particular company. You hear stories over there. There are times when you get fired upon. Whether you get fired upon or those people

are just standing there, it's not going to make any difference. You're still, it's still a fact that you're killing those people. You're shooting them whether . . . Okay, if it was cold blood, if Lt. Calley and the My Lai massacre and his men killed those people, for me to judge him I would have to know the reason why he killed them. People don't understand the pressure you get under when you're over there. Say the day before one of his good buddies was killed, or something like that. Maybe he felt that was restitution for that GI's death who was under him. I can't say. You would have to know the whole situation or why he did it. Now maybe, I think, he's just the scapegoat. In other words, he's the one they picked or that's the one they found out about. I'm sure there are other GI's who could tell you the same story. It wouldn't make any difference if it was one person or fifty. It's still killing a person in cold blood. That's all there is to it.

C: Do you think Calley should be imprisoned or do you think the responsibility lies with somebody else? I know that you've kind of answered that question, but if you could, what would be your response?

E: My feeling is that if you're going to prosecute him, then you have to prosecute every other GI that was over there in combat. Because every guy is firing artillery pieces, firing artillery at troops or coordinates which you give them If I'm out in the field and I call in a coordinate and say, "I'm getting fire from this area," they fire upon it and miss and hit a village and kill fifty people. Why shouldn't they prosecute them? What's the difference? Do you know what I mean? I can't understand any difference in it, I really can't. It's just the fact that they have evidence. If they have evidence that he did it . . . and I'm sure they can find evidence that bombers bombed the wrong place. I know for a fact that there are GI's who were killed by their own guys. As far as helicopter gun ships hitting too close to the target area, or hitting too close to the GI's who were calling in the artillery or the gun ships, it was just a miscalculation, but they still killed them and it's still, you're still killing people. If you fire artillery rounds on a village just because you're getting sniped on from that village and there are all kinds of villagers in there, you're killing them. It's not like you go in there and find the bodies and get a body count. You know the reason why, too.

C: In looking back on your whole experience, especially

Vietnam, what are your feelings today about it? What are your overall feelings about your experience there?

E: Let me say this first, when I first came back, I think, any GI who came back who was in a situation was really gungho. He was really down on people who said anything against it or accused him of anything and so on. I think really mixed feelings.

Like I've been back for six years, and after all that has gone on you really think about what happened over there. It's kind of mixed feelings. You're confused. You don't know exactly. I don't think anybody knows exactly why we were there. A lot of people might, it's kind of a hard question.

C: Certainly. Do you think that one of the reasons why it's a hard question to answer is because unlike other wars, this war, it doesn't seem like anybody really won or lost it? And when you came back you weren't given a hero's welcome. The Vietnam veteran didn't come back to much.

E: True, the only people who actually really appreciated the GI's going were that GI's family. The war had too much dissention; there was too much conflict. Nobody knew exactly what was going on. I know the papers didn't tell the truth of exactly what was going on. I'm sure they wouldn't want to tell the people of the United States exactly what was going on over there.

The only thing, when I was over there, there was a time that I wished that they could have brought all the people who were involved in the decisions of Vietnam, including the President, over there I wish that all, the Secretary of Defense, all the Congressmen who were involved in it with the decisions on what was to be done, bombing and so forth and so on, could have just come over there for just one week and gone out with a combat infantry unit. I guarantee you that they would realize exactly what was going on over there. And I think they would have put an end to it real quick. The thing is they just don't realize exactly what is going on. You have to be there to understand. I could sit there and try to explain it, but to actually be there and go through the situation is something completely different.

C: I see. Well, Rich, thank you very much for your time today. I've enjoyed this and talking about your reflections about the war. Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW